

D ABOUT SUBMIT



Teaching literature on female friendship in the #MeToo era

Studying the whole range of friendships that can exist between women felt a little bit like resistance.

Nudrat Kamal — Updated 03 Feb, 2020 11:04am

My reason for designing an undergraduate literature course titled *Female Friendship in World Literature* was initially more personal than strictly literary: I have been shaped, in big ways and small, by the friendship of women in different moments of my life.

On the emotional landscape of my personality, my female friendships have always loomed large, teaching me in ways both joyous and occasionally painful some of the most worthwhile lessons that I needed to learn in order to live in this world and in my own skin: how to love and care for another person while also honouring my own self, how to accept kindness and to offer it in turn, how to build a relationship that has enough room for both my own jagged edges as well as the other person's.

Because I believe that literature should be studied for its ability to lay bare the complexities of life, I wanted to design a course that would look at this important aspect of my (and, I suspected, every other woman's) life: literature that explored, in all their contradictions and complexities, women's friendships with one another.

Through this course, I reasoned, the students and I could look at various literary texts, films and television shows from around the world, thinking through ways in which factors such as culture, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality would affect the different kinds of friendships women have with one another.

Also read: [*Why is Pakistan afraid of happy women?*](#)

When I offered this course last fall, 22 students signed up, most of whom were young, intelligent and articulate women (only two male students registered for the course, and they participated only minimally, which seemed like a very on-the-nose metaphor for the need for such a course in the first place).

My students were as invested as I was in exploring literary representations of female friendship, deriving joy from having their own experiences articulated in various ways by

authors across time and space.

But as we worked our way through texts by authors ranging from Toni Morrison and Elena Ferrante to Ismat Chughtai and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a theme I had not anticipated began to take shape, in part because the texts themselves offered such a reading and in part because of the perspectives of the students who were reading them at this specific cultural moment: the possibility of female friendships functioning as a space in which women are allowed to heal from trauma and abuse, the potential (sometimes fulfilled and sometimes not) of female friendships providing a safe haven from the myriad everyday violences that women go through.

Scholarship on female friendship and its role in various social and historical contexts is scant, because academia, much like other social institutions, has historically worked on the assumption that anything to do with women's lives is frivolous, and therefore not worth studying.

It is only recently that historians, for example, have turned to studying women's friendships in Britain and America but scholarship on the centrality of women's relationships within other cultural contexts, such as South Asia, is practically non-existent.

But a lack of scholarly attention, of course, does not mean that something does not exist and is not significant in people's lives. And in fact, writers and artists have been writing not only about complex friendships between women but also about the need to write about such relationships even more.

One such writer was Virginia Woolf, who in 1929, in her iconic *A Room of One's Own*, talks about a moment of joy when she discovered that two female characters in a literary work actually *liked* each other:

"Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these — 'Chloe liked Olivia...' Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women. 'Chloe liked Olivia,' I read. And then

it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature.”

Of course, there can be a fruitful queer reading of the above statement too, but I am more interested in Woolf’s assertion that there is a dearth of exploration of the complexity of friendships that can exist between women.

Woolf talks about the relationship between the characters of Cleopatra and Octavia in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, saying,

“Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been altered had she done so! Cleopatra's only feeling about Octavia is one of jealousy. Is she taller than I am? How does she do her hair? The play, perhaps, required no more. But how interesting it would have been if the relationship between the two women had been more complicated.”

Woolf argues that centreing women’s friendships with one another can be one way of rejecting or subverting the male gaze which views female characters in literature (as well as women more generally) as one-dimensional stereotypes, lacking depth and shading:

“All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted.”

She says that this simplistic relationship between female characters is part of a larger trend in literature where women are shown only in relation to men:

“And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose.”

So we began the course by reflecting on Woolf’s words, on what would happen to literature if women’s friendships with one another were treated by both the writer as well as the literary scholar as something worthy of being studied in all its messy, glorious complexity.

We paralleled Woolf’s argument with a much more contemporary one, put forth by comic artist Alison Bechdel who came up with what is now known as the Bechdel Test in 1985, a metric used to measure the representation of women in films.

A film (or a TV show or a literary text) has to pass three basic requirements to pass the Bechdel Test:

1. have two female characters
2. who have names and
3. who talk to each other about something other than a man.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a vast majority of mainstream films fail this test.

Grounding our investigation of literary female friendships on both the scarcity of such representations and the urgent need for them, articulated by two artists almost 60 years apart, we set about studying female friendships as disparate as, for example, Zoya and Angie's in Haseena Moin's *Dhoop Kinaray*, Sula and Nel's in Morrison's *Sula*, Elizabeth and Charlotte's in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and, of course, Elena and Lila's in Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (her epic tetralogy exploring this particular female friendship being one of, if not *the* most compelling literary female friendships ever).

As Woolf had predicted, discussing female friendships in various texts allowed my students and I to reflect on other aspects of women's lives and the various societal structures within which they live.

We discussed the ways in which romantic love and marriage often impedes, or at least, changes and complicates friendships between women.

Many of my students pointed out that in a contemporary South Asian context, women are often actively discouraged from investing in their female friendships once they get married, and that friendships within kinship networks (for example, with female cousins) are overall more acceptable, as those friendships exist under the all-important family structure.

We explored the reasons behind such active discouragement of female friendship, particularly within our context – the biggest reason being the idea that for a woman, family should always be the central preoccupation (parents and siblings when you are single; husband, children and in-laws once you get married).

As we worked our way through the reading list, students reflected on some of the stereotypes that exist in our larger cultural imagination about what a friendship between two women is supposed to look like, and wondered that they endured in popular culture, despite them being so flat and reductive: of the gossiping, backbiting friends, the friends who fight over men, the ones who are filled with jealousy and actively work to bring each other down (we spent quite a bit of time unpacking the infamous “*aurat hi aurat ki dushman hoti hai*” and the ways in which it is rooted in misogyny).

Related: [*Fahmida Riaz, the woman who decolonised feminism*](#)

Of course those kinds of destructive friendships are real, my students reasoned, but that’s just one shade in an entire kaleidoscope of friendships that exist between women, that they themselves experienced and witnessed around them.

We marvelled at the mutability of female friendship, how it can provide the role of the nurturing (or demanding) mother, a confidante, a rival or an advisor, the ways in which friendships can be, in turn, emotionally fulfilling and toxic.

In the beginning of the course, I shared with my students the difficulty I faced in locating texts in Urdu and other South Asian languages that centred female friendships. There were Haseena Moin’s television dramas of the 1980s and I had also included the Bengali novella *Padmarag* written by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, in which a group of women, from different walks of life and running from various difficulties, form a community of women that is built on support and love and friendship.

But I wanted to include an Urdu literary text as well.

We talked about why even progressive and feminist writers like Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai (*Lihaaf* and its queer relationship notwithstanding) have rarely depicted complex relationships between women.

Perhaps it was that there were more urgent aspects of women’s lives that needed to be talked about by these authors, like the violence that often accompanies women’s relationships with men. Or it could be the cultural idea that for women, friendships should be peripheral at best.

Meanwhile, a student pointed me towards a text I had not come across in my own research: a lesser known play of Ismat Chughtai called *Dozakh*, which is out of print but whose dramatic reading had been done by the Zambeel Dramatic Readings group.

I looked up the recording and immediately added the play to my syllabus: a delightful and profound story of a friendship between two old women who have been forced into the margins of society, by their gender and age, but whose lifelong friendship, with its banter and bickering and decades of history, has endured.

The play overtly subverts the desi idea of family over friends, as one of the women is faced with the choice of leaving her friend, with whom she lives, to go live with a distant, conniving relative.

In the end, the female friendship prevails, however, and that, coupled with the rarity of seeing old women in literature presented with empathy and complexity instead of with mockery and caricaturing, made this play an instant favourite in the classroom.

Learn more: [*Piro Preman, the Punjabi poet who pushed the boundaries of sexuality with her verses*](#)

We reflected upon the relationships women seem to have with each other in contemporary Pakistani dramas. In stark contrast to Moin's dramas of the 1980s, the Pakistani TV landscape today is littered with women hating each other.

There are conniving mother-in-laws and vicious *nands* galore, women participating gleefully in each other's oppression in all kinds of ridiculous configurations.

It is bleak and it is, frankly, uninteresting to repeat the same reductive relationship over and over again.

But this reflection gave us the chance to think about women's relationships with one another within the larger family structure, how they can sometimes be built on mutual dislike (we're allowed to not like each other, after all, and patriarchal family structures pit *saas-bahus* and *nand-bhabis* against each other by default) but also how, often, great friendships can also blossom there anyway.

I shared with my students my *nani's* deep and abiding love for her *nand*, my *nana's* sister — her stories of her life in Kanpur often start and end with the adventures she recounts of the two of them, how both were so young when my *nani* got married into the family and how quickly they became close, and how much my *nani* grieved when the two got separated at Partition.

My *nani* once told me of a time when the two of them got into a fight, a trivial fight between two young women that lasted perhaps a day and was over with both women apologising profusely. But it struck me that that memory has remained with my *nani* through all the intervening years, a sign of the endurance of their bond, with all its joys and heartbreak.

A lot has been written, by people much more articulate than me, about the importance of the #MeToo movement. It is a movement a long time in the making, and one that is painful and absolutely necessary.

But teaching a course on female friendship, to a classroom full of mostly young women, drove home the movement's urgency for me in a specific way.

After all, a lot of the female friendships we were exploring were happening in the midst of violence and abuse, whether it was Lila and Elena's, as they grew up amongst poverty and acutely normalised everyday violence against women, or *Padmarag*, where the women who came to form and run Tarini Bhavan, a safe haven for women, are all running from various forms of abuse in their own pasts.

We watched the iconic film *Thelma and Louise*, whose plot kicks off when the best friends have to go on the run when Louise kills a man who was attempting to rape Thelma.

As my students and I grappled with the ways in which the #MeToo movement attempted to get off the ground in Pakistan, as we tried to deal with the outpouring of pain and trauma that was coming through around us, coming into the classroom to parse the lives of characters who were trying to heal from their trauma through their friendships with one another seemed strangely cathartic.

It gave us a way to try and make sense of things in the wider world, and made us look at female friendship and its power in a new light.

Explore: *Watching Bohemian Rhapsody in Lahore*

Of course, to say that female friendships always allow a space for healing from such trauma is a little too easy — in the classroom, we were committed to not romanticising female friendships too much, as that categorisation evades nuance as much as its opposite trope of women being each other's worst enemies.

After all, sometimes friendships are unable to hold the pain of each person's suffering.

Lila and Elena each went through numerous forms of sexualised and gendered violence, but they did not reveal every instance of abuse to one another. In *Padmarag*, some characters felt too ashamed to talk about their suffering.

We watched and discussed *Big Little Lies*, a recent TV adaptation of Liane Moriarty's novel of the same name, a show that handles both female pain and female bonding with an expansive generosity.

In the show, one character is reeling from the aftermath of her sexual assault while another is in a violently abusive marriage that seems perfect from the outside. But despite the closeness of the characters' friendship, it is difficult for them to reach out to one another and talk about their respective traumas, a fact that rings true, given the intense shame that women are made to feel when it comes to the abuse they suffer.

My students appreciated that the show's resistance to offering female friendship as an easy answer away from suffering — it is difficult sometimes to share your pain even with the ones you love the most.

And yet, the show still offers female friendship as having the potential to offer some comfort to women who have faced such violence.

We found a similar positioning of female friendship as a space for healing in the Bollywood film *Parched*, where four women in a village in Gujarat are able to offer kindness and solace to one another as each deals with her own pain.

As we delved deeper into talking about both female friendship and gendered trauma, our own experiences inevitably became part of the discussion.

Both in the classroom as well as in more one-on-one conversations with me, my students started slowly revealing some of their pain, a fact I will always be grateful to my students for.

We talked about how, in our specific context, conversations about what healthy physical intimacy looks like is completely missing or when it occurs is downright dangerous (the only advice given to Pakistani women before their wedding is to never refuse your husband's demand for physical intimacy, and to centre his pleasure while tolerating your pain).

Interview: *Going behind the sensation of Qandeel Baloch – Part I*

We talked about how such discourse makes it hard for women to differentiate between healthy, consensual physical intimacy from violence and abuse. We talked about the complete silence surrounding domestic violence, and how the victim-blaming prevalent can sometimes stop women from confiding even in their closest female friends.

Towards the end of the class, I shared with my students my concern that the course was perhaps becoming too intense, that we were perhaps discussing texts and issues that might be too painful for some of us.

I worried about unintentionally uncovering unhealed wounds and then not being equipped to help them work through their pain adequately.

My students agreed that the course was intense, but that it was also refreshing and liberating to be able to talk about these things in the classroom, which had become, by then, a kind of tiny community of women too.

Some of my students pointed to the fact that the course was dark but also hopeful, that the texts and our discussions of them pointed to fulfilling, nurturing friendships between women that can occur in the face of violence.

I certainly felt hope as I talked to these brilliant women share their thoughts on friendship and kindness, on offering solace and coming together for collective healing in the face of unimaginable injustice.

Getting together twice a week and studying, with academic curiosity and generous empathy, the whole range of friendships that can exist between women, felt a little bit like resistance.

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